

Japan's National Identity: Nationalists or Not?

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Nationalism's Historical Basis

Japan has recently been caught in an identity crisis. Do they see themselves as an isolated, nationalistic entity or do they see themselves as players on the world stage, involved in world affairs? There could hardly be a better symbol of this dichotomy. Accepting the Noble prize for literature in 1968, Yasunari Kawabata delivered a stirring speech in Japanese, reading from ancient Zen poetry. More recently, Japan's second winner of the Nobel Prize, Kenzaburo Oe, struck a very different chord. He spoke in English, while sampling French poetry and paying tribute to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, George Orwell and W.H. Auden. He said he felt intellectually closer to Ireland's W.B. Yeats than to his countryman, Kawabata.¹

Japan has a long history of intense nationalism. As Boyd C. Shafer has put it, nationalism is "that sentiment unifying a group of people who have a real or imagined common historical experience and a common aspiration to live together as a separate group in the future."² Japanese nationalism was born from an elitist patriotism felt by a handful of extraordinary men who led Japan late in the Edo period (1600-1868) and as political leaders in the Meiji period (1868-1912). These men stressed the national welfare over private interests, particularly in defending Japan from foreign aggression. As Japanese society became more integrated in the late 19th century, the public began to accept nationalism in two basic forms. The first was statism, or nationalist loyalties focused on the state. Statism demanded that all Japanese subjects obey and serve the state as the highest object of their allegiance. They were expected to serve in

the armed forces, pay taxes, and wholeheartedly back the state's goals at home and abroad. The other main form of nationalist feeling was ethnic or popular nationalism, with allegiance centering on the Japanese as people. These nationalists felt an intense bond with fellow countrymen because of their shared history, customs, religions, language, and gene pool. Popular nationalism believed in horizontal webs of loyalty to other Japanese rather than vertical filaments of allegiance to an impersonal state. Where statism placed concrete demands for service on the individual, popular nationalism usually involved more sentiment than program. Japanese nationalism reached its peak between 1937-1945, when an extreme form of nationalism, ultranationalism, arose. This form of nationalism sought to bring Japan back into an age of isolation from the West would cultivate their distinctiveness among the world.²

The Japanese have always been conscious of their own distinctiveness in relation to their East Asian neighbors. This is due to its geographical isolation, its monolingual culture, its ethnic homogeneity, its people's strong ties to the soil, a common belief in the gods of Shinto, and an Emperor who simultaneously propitiated the gods, legitimized the state, and symbolized the people. These elements served as the breeding ground for later patriotic feelings of loyalty to the land and all its people. These emotions would become popular during times of political and diplomatic crisis. The Mongol invasions on Kyushu in 1274 and 1281 provoked terror throughout the country. The patriotic Buddhist priest Nichiren urged citizens to take pride and fight for their Japanese heritage. During the 14th century there was an internal strife that led a court historian, Kitabatake Chikafusa, to spread theories of imperial uniqueness that have proved useful for spreading Japan's empire in East Asia.

After the 1868 Meiji restoration, the Japanese society underwent a change from a feudal structure to an open hierarchy based structure that valued wealth and talent. Hierarchical groups

like joint-stock companies, small manufacture enterprises, agricultural cooperatives, and even upstart political parties began to compete for status.³ While these groups competed with one another for predominance, they naturally promoted their own partisan interests for political and economic advantages. Thus, in the mid-19th century Japanese patriots began to spread their views on behalf of the entire society. This was successful since patriotism appeals, above all, to the common good of all inhabitants of a country rather than the narrower interests of organizations competing against each other for status. Patriotism is an all-inclusive phenomenon within a country; it attempts to surmount private, selfish interests by diverting attention to the common good and shared interests of all the countries' citizens. The patriotism expressed by a few farsighted elders during this period helped to bring new leaders to power and the reform of the Meiji restoration.⁴ The nationalist sentiments spread by a small band of patriots to the public at large, coinciding with the rise of an effective central government allowed nationalism to flourish during the Meiji period. The development of media, education, and a single national market during the integration of the Meiji period allowed every Japanese to understand the common national interest.

During the late 19th century, Meiji leaders created a constitution giving permanent authority to procedures that had informally been in place since 1868. They defined allegiance to the state as a citizen's highest duty. The government sponsored Shinto festivals, ceremonies for the Emperor, and homiletic ethics texts in the schools after 1903. This helped to spread statist nationalist feelings across the country. This indoctrination gave way to the social relations of enterprise capitalism instead of the hierarchy of competing interests typical of the Meiji period. New forms of nationalism arose stressing myths of social harmony and uniqueness appeared as Japan began to grow more like other industrial countries. This continued even while Japan

lapsed into economic and diplomatic trouble during the 1920s and 1930s. Statism was then magnified into ultranationalist dogmas once politics fell under military influence in the late 1930's. The government handbook, *Kokutai No Hongi*, announced that the "individual is an existence belonging to a State and is fundamentally one body with it." Doctrines like these crumbled after 1945 with the military defeat in World War II.

Popular Nationalism was also strong from 1890-1945. This form of nationalism focused more on the people as a country rather than the country as a state. Popular Nationalism urged not to praise the state but to build character among its people. At this time men such as *Kuga Katsunan*, *Miyake Setsurei*, *Okakura Kakuzo*, and *Shiga Shigetaka* debated what it meant to be Japanese in a world of sharply divergent and conflicting cultures. Thus began the *nihonjinron* debates that peaked in the seventies. *Nihonjinron* loosely translates as "Japanese character" or "Japanese identity."⁵ There was also much talk before World War II of *kukatai*, national essence, among statist nationalists. For most popular nationalists the emperor was the symbol of the people as a whole. For the statist, however, he defined the vision of a well-ordered state. The statist believed in the emperor's functional role as a modern, political leader, whereas most popular nationalists revered the emperor because of his unique historical role as chief priest of Shinto and messenger to the gods on the people's behalf. In the 1930s and 1940s the country's ability for national mobilization was enhanced because the state took on an image of the common Japanese unified as a people under a sacerdotal throne, rather than the state demanding unyielding support as a sovereign. The ultranationalist form of statism won out during World War II mainly due to the economic and diplomatic perils facing Japan with a unique military beyond civilian control and the need to mobilize for war as an act of national survival. Even

then, the intense indoctrination campaigns of the government during wartime did not heal the separation between the statist and popular nationalists.

Japan's nationalist attitude since 1945 is still being debated. The discussion during this period is possibly the most critical in terms of the Japanese people coming to grips with what it means to be Japanese and how they are viewed on the world stage. Loyalties to the state were somewhat muted after defeat in World War II, but the bond among citizens has remained strong and meaningful. Overall, economic success and international peace has kept threats to the nation at the lowest in centuries. The primary framework for discussing Japanese nationalism and what it means to be Japanese has been the rapid internationalization of cultural life since 1945. Japanese debate this, not as a country isolated from the world but as one in constant interaction with the outside world. Japanese loyalty has come to compete with other aspects of an individual's loyalty, whether transnational such as sports, music, art, and world peace or subnational such as career, school and family. Literature, culture and arts have become so cosmopolitan, and with them styles and tastes, that some critics have found it hard to separate modernity from Japaneseness. Still, few Japanese forget their distinctive social structure that makes them still feel remarkably different from other cultures. Social uniqueness rather than political uniqueness has been the focus of postwar Japanese separateness. Statist nationalism has made a few attempts at revival since the end of World War II. However, its potential for future trouble in a global economic or military crisis is reinforced by the persistence of the imperial throne as a rallying point of loyalties.

The Uniqueness of Japan

Japan's sense of uniqueness is grounded in its long history of isolation that was at first natural but later self-imposed. In Japan, as among other Asian cultures, the group's welfare is

more important than an individual's. The Japanese sense of self is defined through its interaction with others and not merely through the force of individual personality.⁶ The individual worked for the welfare of the family, the local community, the corporation, and the country. "Either one was Japanese or one was not."⁷ Concepts such as language, race, and culture, which are clearly distinct in other cultures, are all basically synonymous in Japan. Until recently, those who spoke Japanese and carried on their lives in a Japanese manner lived in Japan. Furthermore, almost everyone living in Japan, save a few Chinese, Koreans and Dutch traders, was ethnically pure Japanese. Japanese abroad always see themselves as representatives of the whole Japanese and act to bring a positive image to their homeland. A Japanese who succeeds on the world stage is less likely to take pride in his personal accomplishment but rather take pride in bringing honor to Japan. The Japanese take pride in the purity of their blood. Their pride in this leads to a widespread problem of racism toward those who are not native Japanese. Since Japanese feelings of race, culture and nation all coincide, their attitudes toward race are even more intense.

Prior to World War II, Japanese contact with the West had been at a minimum. When they came in contact with the Portuguese in the sixteenth century and the more numerous English and Americans in the nineteenth century, they reacted with shock. The blue eyes and "red" hair of westerners are attributes of goblins in Japanese folklore. They were appalled at the hairy, sweaty bodies that gave off a strong body odor due to a diet higher in animal fat. The terms *Bata-kusai*, "stinking of butter," is still a derogatory term for things obnoxiously Western. Japanese now admire the looks of Caucasians but still find Blacks mysterious and fearsome. During the 1960s civil rights revolutions, Japanese looked at the problem from a majority white point of view rather than as a minority siding with the blacks. The Japanese are even less tolerant of the Koreans and Chinese, who in physical terms look very similar the Japanese.

Many Koreans who were forced to move to Japan during World War II have taken on Japanese customs and style yet are still prevented from acquiring Japanese citizenship. Japanese parents discourage their children from marrying Chinese or Koreans for fear of tainting the pure Japanese blood. The same goes for the *burakumin*, “people of filth,” who are the designated outcasts of Japanese society. The Japanese are also prejudiced toward their Southeast Asian neighbors. This is evident in Japan’s strict control of these people’s immigration. Whereas many Western countries are accepting Southeast Asian immigrants by the thousands, Japan accepts only a handful.

Japan’s feeling of uniqueness has been strengthened by two periods in their history during which they borrowed heavily from abroad. It has had to play catch-up to other technologically advanced cultures in the past. In early times Japan found itself catching up with China and in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it found itself catching up to the West. Every time they have done this, their national identity has become stronger in the process. Both times, they ended up ahead of the power they were catching up to and redefining their own uniqueness. The Japanese view their entire past in terms of foreign influence and native sentiment. They conscientiously distinguish between what came from China and the West and what is natively Japanese. They place what is native Japanese on a higher level. “The Japanese have historically swung like a pendulum between an inferiority complex and a superiority complex in their attitude toward other countries.”⁸ This sense of inferiority toward China fueled many early nationalist sentiments. This returns to the concept of the group’s welfare taking precedence over the individuals. If they believe they are being observed, the Japanese become very self-conscious. They always must be in correct form and dress when travelling abroad or taking up a new sport.

These inferiority complexes have been the breeding ground of nationalist feelings throughout the world, as with the young United States strong patriotism while lying on a raw and weak frontier land. The Japanese often use the term *shimaguni-konjo*, “the feelings of an island people,” to refer to their distinctiveness among the world.

Nationalism has not always worked out well for Japan. It has carried the nation through swings of an inferiority complex to the instability of a superiority complex, as seen in World War II. This has also expanded Japan’s view of being separate from the world and intensified fears that too much borrowing from other countries will rob them of their Japanese-ness. Still, the Japanese may be growing out of these pendulum-like swings of inferiority and superiority. The latest cycle from an overwhelming inferiority complex to an intense superiority complex has developed more slowly since World War II. They may be overcoming these swings between inferiority and superiority complexes with the realization that they have set up a false dichotomy by differentiating between Western technology and native virtues. The Japanese have stopped immediately defining all new technology as being Western. They realized that technology is not culturally specific, but pervades the global culture.

The Internationalization of Japan

There are some in Japan who are uneasy with the rate at which Japan is losing its national identity. Japan is internationalizing, becoming too much like the West. It has become somewhat of a fad lately to include “international” in the name of a company or organization. This addition to a title supposedly resembles a cosmopolitan image for a company. Internationalization can either serve a state well by increasing its prosperity and security, or it can accentuate the vulnerability of a state to economic and political forces beyond its control. The story of postwar Japan is a narrative of the transition from a condition of unconditional vulnerability to the

gradual attainment of an autonomy so well grounded in economic capabilities and fiscal resources as to threaten others. With the end of the cold war in the 1980s, and the resulting removal of the Soviet threat, Japan has been less dependent on the U.S for national security. Therefore, Japan has more room to maneuver to uphold its economic interests.

A major part of this internationalization is actually an Americanization. The phrase “Americanization” can have positive and negative connotations. A neutral explanation of Americanization would be the recognition of the prominence of the role of the U.S. in international political, economic, and cultural life which exerts a magnetic pull on aspirations and tastes of people everywhere. This popular culture is facilitated by the global scale of media and a deliberate campaign to promote consumer lifestyles and materialist success. In many ways, the American way appears to correspond to the actual distribution of desires held by the peoples of the world, especially urban teenagers. The definition of Americanization is necessarily vague and constantly shifting. The basis of Americanization can be identified by reference to images and personalities that were specifically generated in the U.S., like Coca-Cola, Madonna, and Levi’s jeans. Beneath these images exists a corresponding political culture based on worldwide products, that is amplified by youth, sexuality, and a casualness of style that is also associated with the sensuous pleasures of “the good life.” Many Japanese intellectuals agree that Americanization and westernization are leading of leading to the vulgarization of social and cultural life in Japan. Leading to a corporate inspired globalization that is epitomized by McDonald’s golden arches and the Nike swoosh. There will always be this negative, commercialist stigma.⁹ There are also other slants on Americanization that may be seen as positives in some parts of the world and negatives in another. Americanization also means self-expression and individuality. There is a rebellious spirit at the core of rock music, which reaches

the youth of the world more directly than any other forms of Americanization. Along with this rebelliousness comes the political message that constitutionalism, diversity, and ultimately modernation and tolerance are positive for youth. The Japanese cringe at this view of Americanization. Their culture is based on conformity and collectiveness. Rebellion and diversity are not valued on the same level in Japan as they are in the West.

In concrete terms, internationalization exists in the levels of nation, organization, and individual. At the level of nation, it refers to, for example, the extent of cooperation with other nations, involving the movement of people, goods, capital, and information across national boundaries. At the level of organization, it includes the extent of a transnational technological transfer, the establishment of multinational corporations, and the exchange of students and scholars through various sponsoring organizations. At the level of individual, it entails the extent of knowledge of foreign languages and foreign countries, the ability to adapt to living in foreign countries, and the acquisition of the sensitivity, language skills and other abilities necessary for an international experience. The number of Japanese travelling and living abroad is larger than ever. Meanwhile the number of foreigners visiting or staying in Japan has reached 2 million per year, while the scope of their activities has expanded.¹⁰ Japan's internationalization is now passing from the economic and technological arena to that of interaction between people. Living or travelling abroad, which may be viewed as one aspect of 'external internationalization', is no longer a matter of concern only to certain sectors of Japanese society, but to the public in general. Meanwhile, the problem of dealing with the increasing number of foreigners entering Japan, particularly those from Asian countries, who head to Japan for employment, has become a key indicator of the degree of 'internal internationalization' in Japanese society. This has now become an unavoidable problem for the Japanese government to pay due diplomatic attention to

this matter. It is no longer a domestic issue, but one affecting Japan's relations with other Asian countries, thus affecting Japan's image abroad and the effectiveness of its conduct of international relations as a whole. The current debate on Japanese internationalization has gained new significance viewed in this light.

Anti-Internationalism

Americanization will, of course, never completely overtake Japan, or any other country's, indigenous culture, though some fear this. There has been an emergence of several forms of backlash against Americanization, which goes hand in hand with protest against Westernization and modernization. One group that is behind this backlash is the International Center for Japanese Studies in Kyoto. They resist internationalism by combining racist, conservative politics with a culturalist agenda. This institution, also known as *Nichibunken*, is part of a network of cultural institutions that manage, produce, and restrict Japanese culture. Specialists in Japan studies must be aware of these rigid controls while confronting the effort to keep non-Western views on the periphery. "When *Nichibunken* was established by the Ministry of Education to serve as a focal point for research on and about Japan for Japanese and foreign scholars alike, it was clear that culture was being pressed into service on behalf of Japan, Inc."¹¹ In the U.S., *Nichibunken* is likened to institutions such as the National Humanities Center and the Department of Defense that play kindred nationalistic ends. Part of its mission is to stop the Westernization of Japan, or even unWesternize Japanese culture. Those who agree with *Nichibunken* believe America should stop spreading its cultural and economic interests abroad. Rather than lecturing Japan, America should learn from its successes. A country that is 200 years old should stop trying to destroy the traditions that Japan has built up over more than a millennium. One supporter of anti-internationalism is Takeshi Umehara, a philosopher who set

up a foundation in 1987 to export knowledge of Japanese culture. He believes the western world-view of placing rational man at the center and seeing nature as something to be mastered, has promoted a destruction of the environment and thus of man's livelihood. Excessive liberalism has brought social degradation, creating the underclasses typical of Western cities to Japan.¹²

This anti-internationalization has also caused controversy in the educational system. Should Japanese children be taught their history from a nationalistic viewpoint or from one that is more sensitive to other cultures and is less patriotic toward Japan? The Ministry of Education has been accused of omitting accounts of Japanese war atrocities from textbooks and promoting the national anthem and the flag in schools. There are citizens who have actively opposed the ministry's nationalistic policies. In 1965, Mr. Ienega, an historian, took the government to court to banishing his version of the past from the view of the Japanese school children. His book claimed that Japan's military government glamorized war and covered up atrocities. There were 300 pages in his book that the ministry deemed unacceptable. Without ministry approval, the book may not be used in schools. Ienega claims that such interference was unconstitutional. The Supreme Court upheld the law that textbook screening does not conflict with academic freedom and is therefore constitutional. The Ministry of Education has also been on a campaign to persuade schools to give children more exposure to the flag and the national anthem. In 1985, 90 percent of Japan's elementary schools displayed the flag at ceremonies opening the school year, as compared to 98 percent displaying it in 1992.¹³ The ministry has backed the national anthem even more intensely. The proportion of elementary schools playing the national anthem at the start of the academic year increased from 46 percent in 1985 to 84 percent in 1992. The teachers union says the song promotes aggression in their students. However, the union's power is waning, and teachers hostile to the anthem or the flag risk a pay cut. Previously, the Japanese

anthem was rarely heard. The only time children heard it was the opening to sumo matches; therefore many children came to know the song as the “sumo song.”¹⁴

Conclusion

As Westerners and American's it may be difficult for us to see the importance of Japan's national identity. America's 200 year history is a blink of an eye compared to Japan's millenium long existence. We also, generally, take less pride in our nationalism. When asked what we are, we answer white, black, Christian, Jewish, human. If a Japanese is asked this question he would most definitely answer “Japanese.”

Japan and America are on the opposite sides of the internationalization coin. While America is doing most of the internationalizing, Japan is one of the most sensitive countries in the world to this phenomenon. America should not consciously force its ideals upon Japan. However, change and progression are natural, and much of the world is changing toward a more Americanized culture. I believe moderate internationalization will benefit Japan. It must be treated in the same manner as new technology. It will bring many benefits and fulfillment, but it will also bring unforeseen problems that involve tough decisions. Internationalization at this moderate rate will allow Japan to gradually become comfortable with the new ideas. A rapid internationalization could bring on another period of superiority complex or an even further divide between modern Japan and its rich cultural past. Japan's days of separation from the world and isolation from global culture are over. Heading into the next millenium, the Japanese must try to hold on to its intrinsic national character while carefully adapting to the world changing around them.

Endnotes

- ¹ The Economist, 1995, p. 19.
- ² Ultrationalism, 1983, p. 144
- ³ Mcveigh, 1998, p. 125.
- ⁴ Sasaki-Uemura, 1994, p. 124.
- ⁵ Nationalism, 1983, p. 230.
- ⁶ Japan, 1994, p. 1.
- ⁷ Reischaur, 1997, p. 395.
- ⁸ Reischaur, 1997, p. 395.
- ⁹ Falk, 1992, p. 48.
- ¹⁰ Sadako, 1992, p. 66.
- ¹¹ Fujii, 1998, p. 149.
- ¹² The Economist, 1993, p. 19.
- ¹³ The Economist, 1993, p. 36.
- ¹⁴ Linicone, 1993, p. 125.

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